



What is diarrhea?

Diarrhea is an illness that is defined by more watery stools, less-formed stools and increased frequency of stools. Diarrhea can be caused by changes in diet, such as eating more than usual amounts of certain foods, and the use of some medications. Infectious causes include viruses, bacteria and parasites.

- Viruses: rotaviruses, enteric adenoviruses, astroviruses, caliciviruses, hepatitis A, enteroviruses
- Bacteria: *Shigella*, *Salmonella*, *Campylobacter*, *Escherichia coli* 0157:H7, *Clostridium difficile*
- Parasites: *Giardia*, *Cryptosporidium*

Who is at risk for diarrhea?

People of all ages are susceptible to the viruses, bacteria and parasites that cause acute diarrhea. Depending on the infectious agent, complications are more likely to occur in children younger than 5, the elderly or people with compromised immune systems.

What are the symptoms of diarrhea?

The symptoms of diarrhea may include frequent loose or watery stools, abdominal cramps and tenderness, fever, generally not feeling well or blood in the stool. Individuals can be infected and can pass the disease to others with minimal signs or symptoms.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms may be variable depending on the cause of diarrhea. See specific disease fact sheets.

How is diarrhea spread?

Diarrhea is most often spread through fecally contaminated food, hands or surfaces touched by objects or hands put into the mouth (fecal-oral route). Water contaminated by human or animal feces (e.g., swimming pools) or trips to sites with animals (e.g., farms, pet stores, petting zoos) are also possible routes of transmission.

When and for how long is a person able to spread the disease?

How long a person is able to spread the disease may be variable and depends on the cause of diarrhea. See specific disease fact sheets.

How is a person diagnosed?

Laboratory tests are available to determine the specific disease, if necessary.

What is the treatment?

Treatment varies with the different diseases. Refer to specific disease fact sheets.

Does past infection make a person immune?

No

Should children or others be excluded from day care, school, work or other activities if they have diarrhea? (Refer to specific fact sheets.)

Yes, if the child has:

- Diarrhea not contained in the toilet (all infants and children in diapers with diarrhea must be excluded until either the diarrhea stops or the continued loose stools are deemed not to be infectious by a licensed health-care professional).
- Blood or mucus in stool.
- Abnormal color of stool for that child (for example, all black or very pale).
- No urine output in eight hours.
- Fever and behavior change.
- Jaundice (yellow skin or eyes).
- The appearance of being ill.

The child should be excluded if he or she is unable to participate and the staff determines that they cannot care for the child without compromising their ability to care for the health and safety of the other children in the group.

Infected child-care and health-care staff or people who handle food also should be excluded until they no longer have diarrhea.

What can be done to prevent the spread of diarrhea?

- Careful and frequent hand washing is essential, especially after toilet use or handling soiled diapers and before anything to do with food preparation or eating.
- Properly cook and store food.
- Report clusters of diarrheal illness (two or more ill individuals associated with the same exposure or setting) to the North Dakota Department of Health.

Additional Information:

For additional information, call the North Dakota Department of Health at 800.472.2180.

Resource: American Academy of Pediatrics. [Children In Out-of-Home Child Care]. In: Pickering LK, ed. Red Book: 2003 Report of the Committee on Infectious Diseases. 26th ed. Elk Grove Village, IL: American Academy of Pediatrics; 2003:[123-127].

